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SUBJECT: Security Dialogues with the Panamanian Government

REF: STATE 112900; PANAMA 00571

CLASSIFIED BY: Stephenson, AMB; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

USG-GOP Security Dialogues

[1](#)1. (U) This cable is a response to ref A.

[1](#)2. (C//NF) As Panama has no military, there are no formal POL-MIL or MIL-MIL dialogues between the GOP and the USG. Our robust security cooperation is coordinated through high level meetings between the Ambassador and various senior GOP officials, including the President, Vice-President/Foreign Minister, the Minister of Government and Justice (MOGJ), and the Minister of the Presidency (MINPRES). There has been a recent attempt to formalize a bi-weekly meeting of the Ambassador, DCM, and Pol/Security officer (POL/MIL, without the Military) and the VP/FM, MOGJ, and the MINPRES. There has been one meeting so far, so it is unclear if this format will solidify. If so, this meeting could become a vital tool for coordinating with a government that has enormous problems collaborating internally. Some issues will need to be taken to an even larger group, including the security service chiefs, to make sure everyone is on the same page. There is also a deep and wide working level collaboration, including almost daily law-enforcement and intel cooperation among several USG agencies and their GOP counterparts.

Maritime Counter-Narcotics Coordination

[1](#)3. (SBU) The GOP and the USCG recently held their second bilateral meeting on the implementation of the Salas-Becker Agreement, which details the rules for cooperation between the USCG and the Panamanian National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN) on counter-narcotics operations. It was agreed at this meeting that these meetings will become annual, as was stipulated in the SBA

agreement but never carried out before this series of meetings. The meetings have been very useful, establishing a mechanism for clarifying misunderstandings, and bringing all members of the GOP involved in maritime counter-narcotics work together with their Embassy and USCG colleagues to establish effective SOPs.

#### Darien Coordination

14. (C) Post has also established a dialogue with the GOP on the implementation of the USG/GOP Darien strategy, which is being partially funded by 1207 funds. This dialogue has mostly been with officials from the Ministry of the Presidency, who are in charge of coordinating the civilian "all of government" approach for the GOP on the joint strategy, designed to deny the FARC safehaven in the Darien. Coordination of the security aspects of this strategy have taken place at the meetings described in paragraph one.

#### Assessment

15. (C//NF) The Embassy is highly involved in Panamanian security affairs, and frequently acts as the GOP's strategic planning and

analysis arm, due to the lack of security expertise within the GOP. The GOP now consistently briefs visiting delegations the exact analysis of the security situation in Panama that Post's LESWG briefed to the incoming government on June 23 (ref B). The Embassy's forward leaning position on security has been necessary because the GOP does not have great bandwidth on security issues, but faces a grave crisis as narco-trafficking skyrockets, and crime rates and gang activity climb at alarming rates. This creates a situation where the Embassy makes bold strategic and tactical proposals, that often end up getting diluted and/or modified as the GOP attempts to execute. The Embassy's proposal for the GOP to send two interceptor boats and 20 men to Puerto Pinas, on the Darien Pacific coast, to work with JIATF-S assets in the area to cut the littoral drug-trafficking route is a case in point. The idea was to create a strong presence in one critical area, which was key to FARC drug trafficking, rather than dispersing limited assets through Panama's territorial waters. After two months of inaction, the idea evolved into a proposal to create 11 naval stations - which will severely tax Panama's limited personnel, equipment and logistical capability. The Joint Task Force that was part of the proposal may yet prove to be effective - showing why coordinating security strategy with the GOP is worthwhile, though not always easy.

16. (C) This problem is the result of a weak leadership structure within the GOP, where the President makes strong impulsive decisions with minimal information, Ministers and security leaders do not share information or coordinate actions, and there is no middle level security bureaucracy to plan, evaluate or execute strategies. Nevertheless, Panama is critical to U.S. national security, and the Embassy will remain heavily engaged in this issue. Critical to our success so far has been the tight coordination among all Country Team members, leading to coherent proposals that have inter-agency support. It is Post's evaluation that our security dialogue is vibrant and essential, but that implementation will continue to be a challenge.

STEPHENSON